Overnight Accommodations for the Destitute in the Victorian Era

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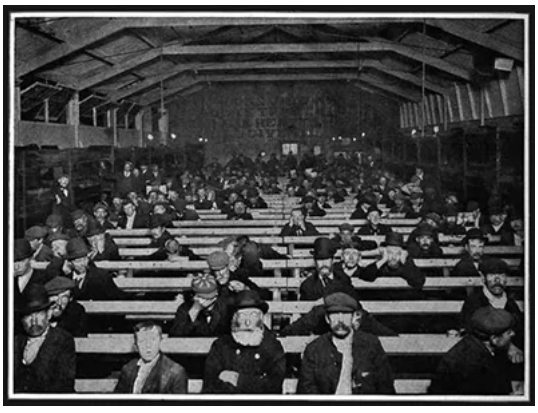
posted by pete fairhurst 2

Source: https://www.winterwatch.net/2025/09/overnight-accommodations-for-the-destitute-in-the-victorian-era/

In the Victorian era, the homeless were a persistent challenge for Londoners. It was also an issue in Paris. Industrialization was one reason for an exploding homeless population. In order to accommodate the railroad, neighborhoods had to be demolished. That resulted in fewer houses and tenements, and drove up rents. In addition, workers from rural regions flocked to London looking for work. The jobs they took gave them some money, and contributed to the rent spiral.

Charitable organizations offered shelters known as penny sit-ups, two penny hangovers (or two-penny ropes), and the two or four penny coffins.

Of these, the penny sit-up was the cheapest option. A penny got a person food and shelter, and the penny sit-up price allowed the person to sit on a bench all night in a warm dry building. Of course in hot weather there was no air conditioning which added to the squalid conditions.



One journalist went to see how the penny sit-up operated and provided the following description:

> *"Rightly understood, the 'Penny Sit-up' is the most remarkable feature of the homeless side of London, not so much because of what the ordinary visitor sees as of what he does not see. He carries away a mental picture of a large shed, of row after row of backed forms, occupied to their fullest capacity by men in all stages of squalor; and if he is there about midnight, of the inmates bent forward on their seats, with their heads resting on their folded arms, which are supported in turn by the backs of the forms in front of them, all, or nearly all, are fast asleep. That is the surface aspect of the 'Sit-up'; and it is sufficiently pathetic and suggestive to haunt one for weeks afterwards. ... You can find men in the 'Penny Sit-up' who have slept in the Salvation Army shelters, shifting about from one to another, every night, since they were opened."*

If a person had two pennies, he or she could purchase the two penny hangover. This option, like the penny sit-up, allowed the person to obtain food (usually tea or coffee and some bread), shelter, and a bench. A rope was placed across the bench so that the destitute client could lean over it and sleep. The person still could not lie down. Moreover, in the morning, when the rope was cut, the destitute person was expected to immediately leave.

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The two penny hangover solution was once described by the writer Charles Dickens in his “Pickwick Papers”:

> *“And pray Sam, what is the twopenny rope?’ inquired Mr. Pickwick. ‘The Twopenny rope, sir,’ replied Mr. Weller, ‘is just a cheap lodgin’ house where the beds is twopence a night!’ ‘What do they call a bed a rope for?’ said Mr. Pickwick. ‘Well the advantage o’ the plan’s obvious. At six o’clock every mornin’, they lets go the ropes at one end, and down falls all the lodgers. Consequence is that, being thoroughly waked, they get up very quickly, and walk away.’”*

If a homeless or destitute person wanted to lay down to sleep, he or she needed to purchase what was called the two penny or four penny coffins. The two-penny coffin was for the bed alone and the four-penny coffin usually included food. These two or four penny coffins, sometimes called bunks, were barren wooden boxes barely long enough to allow a person to stretch out. They contained neither mattress nor covers.

There were night officers running herd and security over these facilities and drunkenness was prohibited. The drug plague wasn’t the issue it is today so zombie dangers were less of a threat. They were thoroughly cleaned out once the clientele left which was at 6 am.

Last year I had the misfortune of encountering benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) – (where do they come up with ‘benign” for this affliction- anything but) which necessitated me being outfitted with a catheter and bag. This happened while visiting my son in the US. The issue was unresolved when I returned to Europe. I am also hobbled from a quad knee tendon rupture and surgery in 2020 from a fall.

I then ran into more bad luck as flights were continually cancelled and delayed. This was at the tail end of the scamdemic when air travel was poorly functioning.

One hellish airport I experienced during this ordeal was Brussels. I was exhausted at this point but had to wait there for seven hours. I sat nodding in and out in the miserable equivalent of a one penny sit up. And here they are.

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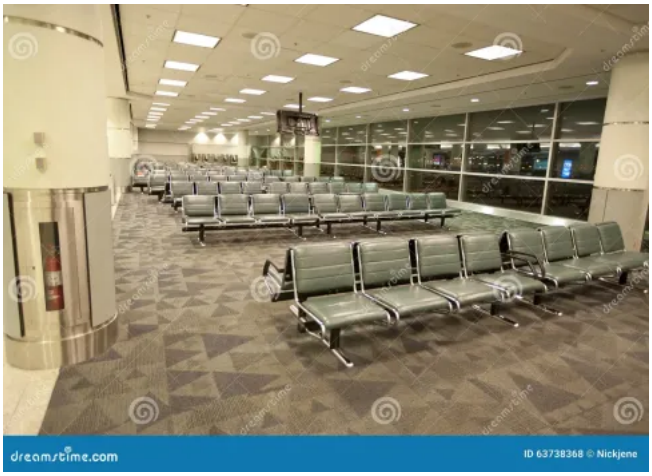
Notice the floor, and here is the concourse. At one point and in need of laying out to relieve my stiff knee and find a little more space for my catheter bag – I located a corner with thin carpet. It was about the hardest surface I've ever half-slept on. They must use some kind of hardened marble.

Next they hauled my sorry ass to Frankfurt for another delayed connection. Frankfurt was an upgrade to a two penny coffin, although quite hard and uncomfortable. And thankfully when I laid out there were no monitors to bother me. I found a relatively quiet spot as Frankfurt doesn't have the long wide concourse that the Brussels one penny sit up shit show offers. Travel tip- if you fly into or out of Europe and have any connection waits, avoid Brussels like the plague.



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Tapestry says:

Not trying to justify anything but I have seen exhausted Filipino drivers sleeping sitting up slumped over the back of a chair in similar vein. Taxi drivers work 24 hour shifts in some cases taking stimulants to keep going. They pay the owner a fee for 24 hours useage of the vehicle, and max their earnings in this way snatching occasional sleep as described, in drivers' waiting rooms etc. As regards long flights and delays I am blessed with the ability to sleep anywhere anyhow and can find 36 hour journeys with delays easier than 16 hour journeys and I can arrive fully refreshed, sleeping sitting up or lying down. I started flying in 1968, and flew many times in 1972 around the world as a student, and ever since. One year taking off a hundred times, doing business all over Asia. My brain recognises the state of nothingness. I never watch movies or touch the entertainment screen, eat every other meal, drink water otherwise and sleep endessly. One air hostess concluded I must be ill as I slept a whole 14 hour flight once. I block my ears and cover my eyes with the provided masks. That's not the case if you are in pain. That must be horrendous. Rotten luck. In the Philippines I was able to sleep on their mats unlike most 'foreigners' and I was referred to as a 'cowboy' for eating their food, washing the same way as the locals do and sharing their sleeping and living conditions. That said, I was 100% healthy and it was always warm. A hard cold floor would be very different. In pain unthinkable. Regarding the above, maybe I'm just a dozy sod, past sell by date.

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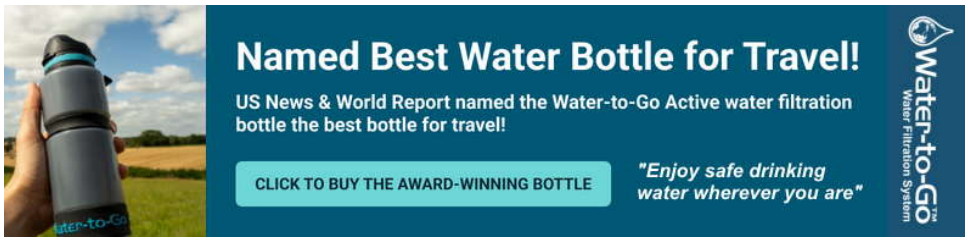

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